COLLEGE READINESS

A First Look at

Higher Performing High Schools



School Qualities that Educators Believe Contribute Most to College and Career Readiness

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A First Look at Higher Performing High Schools: School Qualities that Educators Believe Contribute Most to College and Career Readiness

Introduction

The Common Core State Standards Initiative represents one of the most significant reforms to US education in recent history. As of June 2012, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Standards.[1] ACT is pleased to have played a leading role in the development of the Standards. Not only did the initiative draw on our longitudinal research identifying the knowledge and skills essential for success in postsecondary education and workforce training, but our College Readiness Standards™ were also among the resources used in the creation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

In *A First Look at the Common Core and College and Career Readiness* (ACT 2010), we recognized that the goal of college and career readiness (CCR) changes expectations by setting higher standards for all students to meet as they leave high school. Among ACT-tested high school graduates of 2011, only one in four met all four College Readiness Benchmarks (ACT 2011).

While the national CCR rates suggest significant room for improvement, there are high schools across the country where students are advancing more quickly toward CCR. As educators work to improve and prepare for implementation of the CCSS, it is worthwhile to examine the high schools where students are progressing toward CCR at atypically fast rates. What is it about these schools that educators perceive contributes most to their students' growth? Are the school qualities that are deemed most important different for school administrators and teachers? What are educators' general perceptions of the value of the CCSS? How far along are these schools in implementing the CCSS? This study addressed these questions by surveying educators at high schools across the country that have demonstrated strong progress toward CCR. We discuss how the findings relate to core practices that can be used to guide coherent approaches to school improvement.

ACT has long defined college readiness as the acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a postsecondary institution (such as a two- or four-year college, trade school, or technical school) without the need for remediation. ACT's definition of college and career readiness was adopted by the Common Core State Standards Initiative and provides a unifying goal upon which educators and policymakers now must act.

ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum scores required on the ACT subject tests for high school students to have a 75 percent chance of earning a grade of C or better, or about a 50 percent chance of earning a grade of B or better, in selected courses commonly taken by first-year college students: English Composition; College Algebra; social sciences courses such as History, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, and Economics; and Biology. The Benchmark scores on the ACT tests are 18 in English, 22 in mathematics, 21 in reading, and 24 in science; on the ACT Writing Test, a score of 7 or above indicates readiness for college-level writing assignments.

Key terms describing school qualities. Throughout the report, we use school ***practices*** to refer to specific behaviors and activities of school personnel; examples include *school administrators provide feedback to teachers after classroom visits* and *students are recognized for outstanding academic achievement.* ***Climate*** refers to conditions, atmosphere, and attitudes at the school; examples include *this school has an established climate of high expectations for students* and *teachers are skilled at classroom management.* School ***qualities*** refer to the school practices and aspects of climate that were assessed in the study.

Overall Results

School Qualities Believed to Contribute Most to College and Career Readiness

- Aspects of school climate reflecting supportive and orderly school environments were deemed most important.
 - Strong relationships between students and teachers was rated the strongest contributor to student achievement.
 - Safe and orderly school environment was also among the strongest contributors.
- Aspects of school climate reflecting high academic expectations and focused instruction were perceived as strong contributors.
 - High expectations for students and teachers were consistently deemed important.
 - Classroom management and maximization of instructional time in core academics were rated as strong contributors.
- School practices relating to high academic expectations and focused instruction were rated as strong contributors.
 - Clear communication to teachers of expectations about student learning standards and curriculum was highly rated.
 - Access to and effective use of quality curriculum and teaching resources were also commonly endorsed as strong contributors to student achievement.
 - Use of assessments with instruction (e.g., use of formative assessment tools and alignment of classroom assessments and instruction) were deemed important by most educators.
- Several practices were rated by most educators as NOT contributing a great deal to student achievement; however, these practices were also *occurring* with less frequency than the strong contributors, and *should not be dismissed as unimportant.*
 - Relative to other practices, inclusion of teachers in professional development planning and scheduling was not rated as contributing to student achievement, and only about half of the educators surveyed indicated that these practices were occurring at their schools.
 - Educators at higher performing high schools do not routinely collaborate with teachers from their feeder middle schools; social studies teachers were least likely to rate this practice as a strong contributor to student achievement.
 - The importance of practices related to teacher monitoring, feedback, and evaluation varied significantly across types of staff, with administrators being more likely to rate these practices as important.

CCSS Perceptions

- About three-quarters of educators at higher performing high schools reported having at least moderate knowledge of the Standards as of fall 2011.
- District-level guidance for implementing the Standards has exceeded state-level guidance.
- Less than one in five educators believe that adequate funding is available to their district for implementing the Standards.
- Most educators are optimistic that the Standards will lead to improved CCR, though nearly one-third remain neutral.

CCSS Implementation Progress

- Of the educators who have at least moderate knowledge of the Standards, the percentage who don't know when their school/district will begin implementation ranges from 26%–45% across implementation tasks.
- Over two-thirds of educators at higher performing high schools reported that their school/district will have begun identifying differences between previous state standards and the Common Core State Standards before the end of the 2011–2012 school year.
- Less than one-third of educators reported that their school/district will have begun designing an evaluation system that measures student mastery of the Standards before the end of the 2011–2012 school year.
- The most common implementation challenge named by both teachers (33%) and administrators (34%) was lack of funding. Lack of time or resources (31% of teachers and 30% of administrators) and lack of teacher knowledge of the Standards (23% of teachers and 32% of administrators) were also cited.

Study Methods

Selection of Higher Performing High Schools

ACT researchers used grade 8 to grade 12 student assessment data to identify examples of high schools where students have progressed toward CCR at atypically fast rates. Schools were identified primarily based on student growth in achievement between grade 8 and grade 12. A smaller number of schools were identified based on their graduates' high ACT scores or improvement in scores across recent cohorts of graduating students.[2]

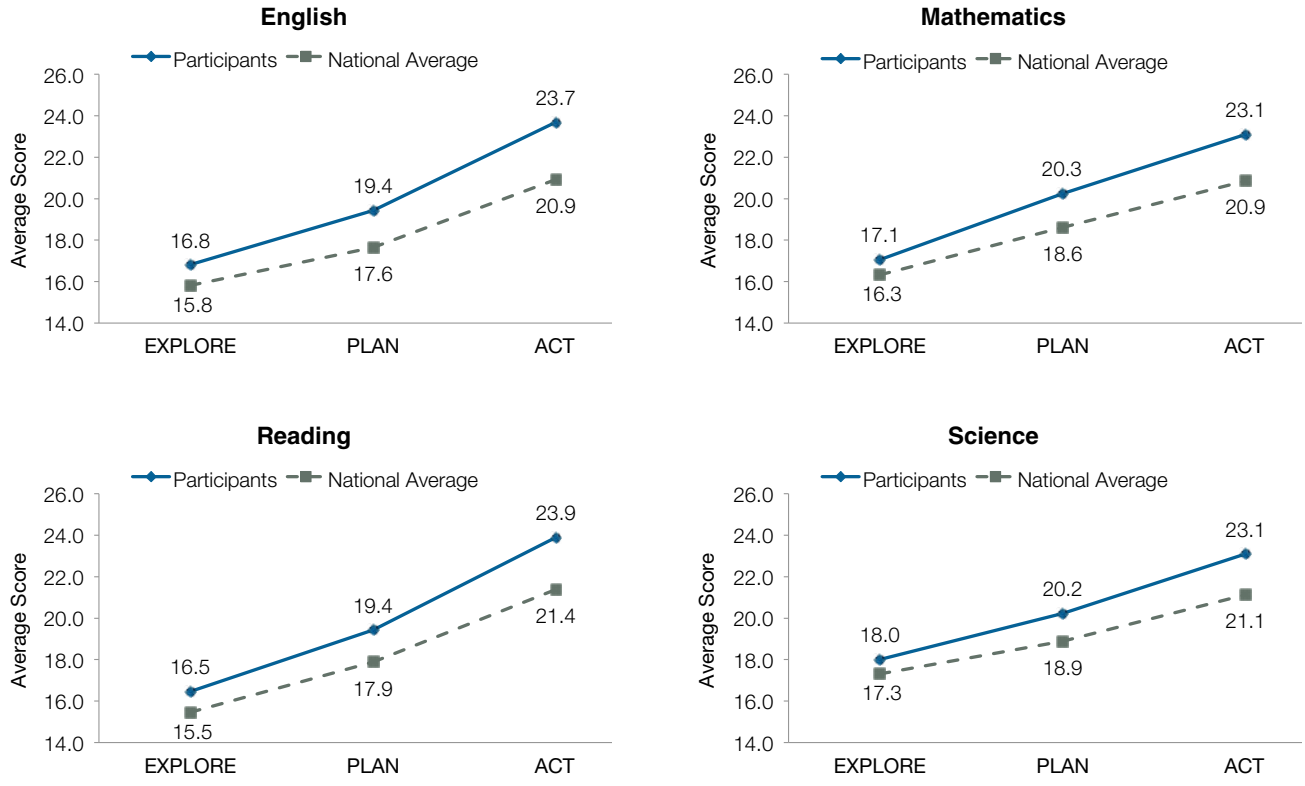
EXPLORE®, PLAN®, and the ACT® are designed to measure student achievement over time using a common score scale. EXPLORE is typically used for grades 8 and 9, PLAN for grade 10, and the ACT for grades 11 and 12. In addition to the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, there are corresponding EXPLORE and PLAN Benchmarks for use by students in earlier grades to gauge their progress in becoming ready for college and careers.[5]

Efforts were made to identify a diverse mix of schools by socioeconomic status, race, and state. From across the country, over 100 high schools were identified as higher performing. Of these, 63 schools from 25 states participated in the study.[3]

Student Achievement and Growth toward CCR

Across all four subject areas, students from the study schools grew faster than what is typically observed for students who have taken EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT. Figure 1 compares average student growth from grade 8 to the ACT for students from the participating schools to the national averages.[4] For example, the national growth average in mathematics was 4.6 score points, but students from the study schools averaged 6.0 points of growth—a 30% increase in growth. Importantly, the average growth trajectory for students from the participating schools exceeded the trajectory of the College Readiness Benchmarks.[5] Relative to other schools, students from the study schools were more likely to remain on—or surpass—the trajectory needed for CCR.

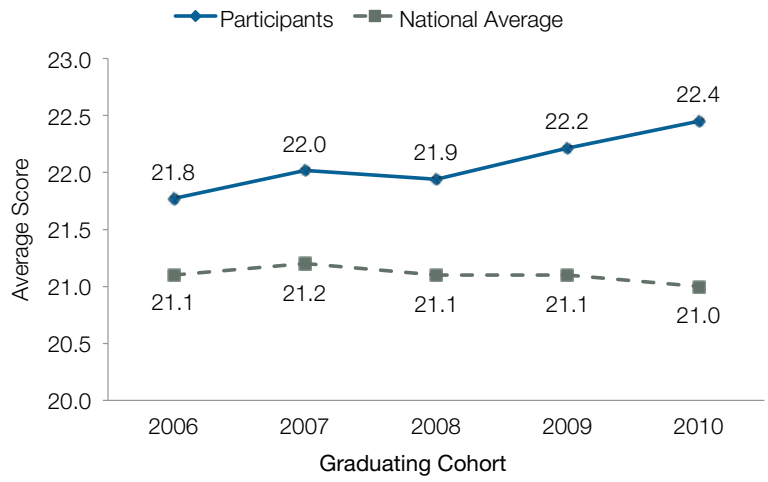
Figure 1: Student Growth Averages



Note. The growth statistics presented in Figure 1 are based on 53 of the 63 study schools that tested one or more of the graduating cohorts of 2006–2010 with EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT.

Another criterion for school selection was having an improving CCR trend over time. For the study schools, average ACT scores were 0.7 points above the national average in 2006, and continued to improve to nearly 1.5 points above the national average in 2010. The schools that elected not to participate in the study were similar to the participating schools in achievement and growth.

Figure 2: Average ACT Composite Scores at Study Schools, 2006–2010



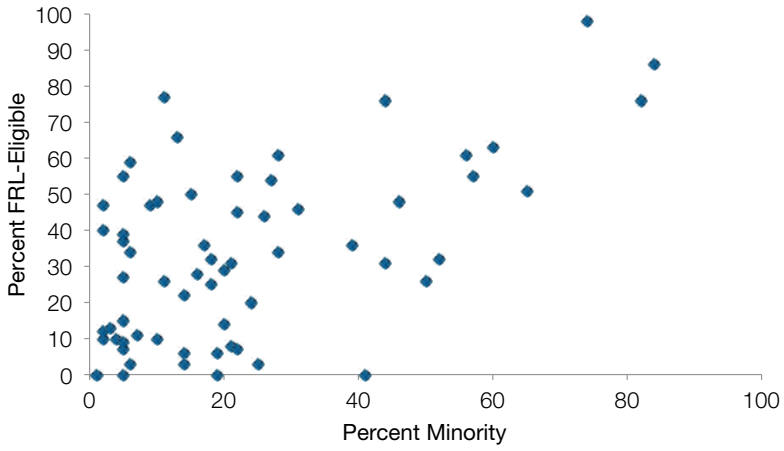
Compared to the nation, students from the participating schools were more likely to be ready for credit-bearing college courses (see table in endnotes).[6] The percentages of students from the participating schools meeting each College Readiness Benchmark and meeting all four Benchmarks were higher than the national averages for 2010 by 16–18 percentage points.

The study included all types of schools, including those serving students from low-income families and underrepresented minority groups. Figure 3 contains a scatterplot displaying the 63 schools' percent of students from underrepresented minority groups and percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL).[7] A quarter of the schools have student bodies with at least 50% eligible for FRL, while nearly half serve at least 20% underrepresented minority students.

The study relied on educators' self-report of practices and climate at their school, without independent verification or observation of the practices and climate. Reliance on self-report data, and the possible bias that results, is a limitation of the study. Most of the survey items asked staff to indicate their level of agreement with statements describing school qualities using a 5-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate how much each item contributes to student achievement at their school. Figure 4 illustrates the dual-scale format for a sample of survey items.

The survey included 31 items assessing school practices, 15 assessing school climate, 9 assessing perceptions of the CCSS, and 7 assessing CCSS implementation progress. The items and result summaries are presented in the endnotes.[9]

Figure 3: Student Demographics of Participating Schools



Survey Development

The primary research questions guiding the study were "What are the school qualities that personnel at higher performing high schools believe make the greatest difference in preparing students for CCR?," "Are the school qualities that are deemed most important different for school administrators and teachers?," "How far along are personnel at higher performing high schools in implementing the changes required by the CCSS?," and "What perceptions do personnel at higher performing high schools have of the CCSS?"

A survey was developed to address these questions. Survey item development was informed by prior school effectiveness research, established school improvement frameworks, and recent studies of CCSS implementation progress.[8] The survey asked school staff to report on the *presence* of practices and climate at their school and to rate the extent that each *contributes* to student achievement. The survey concluded with questions eliciting opinions about the rigor, value, and direction of the CCSS as well as progress and challenges related to implementation.

Figure 4: Example Dual-Scale Format

First, indicate your level of agreement with each of the statements listed below. Then rate how much each has contributed to student achievement at your school.

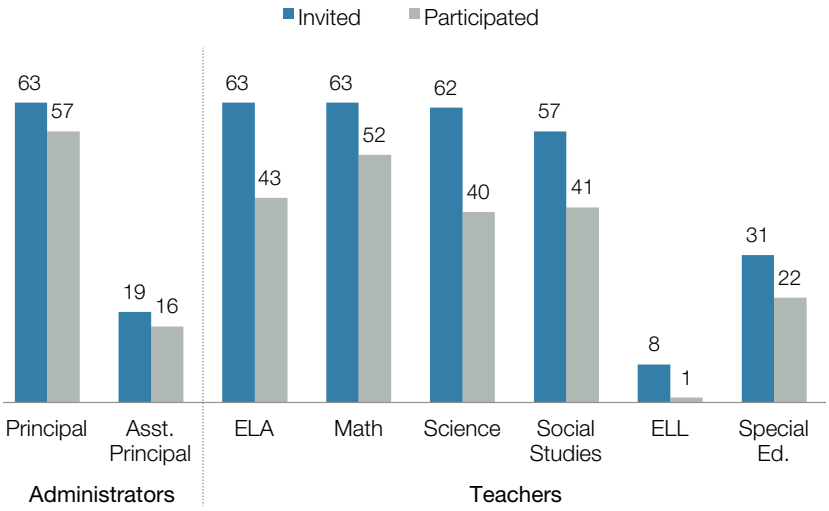
	Level of Agreement					Contribution to Student Achievement			
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	A great deal	A moderate amount	A little	Not at all
Clear expectations about student learning standards and curriculum have been communicated to teachers.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This school has an established climate of high expectations for teachers.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This school has an established climate of high expectations for students.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Strong relationships between students and teachers exist throughout this school.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The families we serve are committed to their children's education.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Survey Participants

ACT invited 366 educators from the 63 participating schools to complete the online survey during the fall of 2011. Survey invitees were told that the survey would take approximately 20 minutes to complete and were assured that their individual responses would be kept confidential and that data would only be reported in aggregate form.

Across the 63 schools, 272 educators completed the survey for a response rate of 74%. Principals had the highest response rate (90%), while assistant principals (84%) and math teachers (83%) also had relatively high response rates. Only one of eight English language learner (ELL) teachers completed the survey (13%). The participants were evenly distributed across the core subject areas, and special education teachers were also represented.

Figure 5: Number of Survey Invitees and Participants by Position



Participating schools were asked to submit a list of all administrators, core subject area teachers, ELL/ESL specialists, and special education teachers. From those lists, ACT researchers randomly selected 5–6 individuals to participate in the survey, including at least one administrator and at least one teacher from each of the four core subject areas.

The survey respondents included a mix of early career, middle career, and veteran educators.[10] Most of the teachers were female (66%), while most of the administrators were male (66%). For teachers, the distribution of grade level(s) taught was relatively even (55% grade 9, 67% grade 10, 73% grade 11, and 68% grade 12). A majority of teachers (96%) and administrators (86%) were White; the small percentage of educators from racial/ethnic minority groups is a limitation of the study.[11]

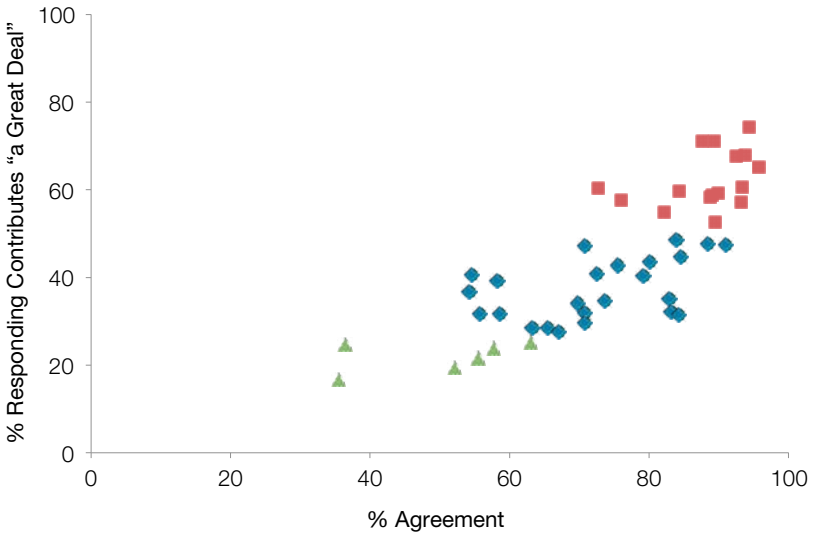
Detailed Results

Relating Presence of School Qualities to their Perceived Contributions to Student Achievement

An agreement rate for each item was calculated as the percentage of educators who agreed or strongly agreed that the item described their school. The average agreement rate across the 46 items describing school practices and climate was 75%; only 11% of responses across the 46 items were "disagree" or "strongly disagree." Thus, most of the survey items measured school qualities that educators believe are present at higher performing high schools.

When examining the qualities most commonly rated as strong contributors to student achievement, it is important to understand that contribution ratings are influenced strongly by the extent that the quality is present at the school. For example, educators would be less likely to rate *"Collaboration time is built into teachers' schedules"* as a strong contributor if they did not believe that the statement was true about their school. Across the survey items, contribution ratings increased significantly with each level of agreement rating (Figure 6). Thus, to understand *why* educators at higher performing high schools believe some qualities matter more than others, it is important to consider the level of agreement measuring whether the school quality is present at the school.

Figure 6: Level of Agreement and Contribution of 46 School Qualities



Note. Red squares represent school qualities that were endorsed as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement by at least 50% of educators, blue diamonds represent school qualities endorsed as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement by greater than 25% but less than 50% of educators, and green triangles represent school qualities that were endorsed as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement by 25% or less of educators.

School Qualities Contributing Most to Student Achievement

Of the 46 school qualities that were assessed, we first identified those that were endorsed as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement by at least half of the survey respondents. Sixteen of the 46 qualities met this criterion (marked in Figure 6 as red squares), including nine measures of climate and seven practices. The following two sections describe the school climate markers and practices that the educators indicated are contributing most to student achievement.

Aspects of School Climate Contributing Most to Student Achievement

The aspects of school climate with the highest ratings as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement were focused around three general themes: supportive and orderly learning atmosphere, high expectations, and focused instruction (Table 1).

Table 1: Aspects of School Climate Most Commonly Rated as Strong Contributors to Student Achievement

Aspect of School Climate	% Agreement	% Responding Contributes "a Great Deal"
Strong relationships between students and teachers exist throughout this school.	94%	74%
This school has an established climate of high expectations for students.	89%	71%
Instructional time is maximized in core academic subjects.	88%	71%
This school's environment is safe and orderly.	94%	68%
This school has an established climate of high expectations for teachers.	92%	68%
Teachers are skilled at classroom management.	93%	61%
The families we serve are committed to their children's education.	73%	60%
Teachers understand that the academic objectives of the established curriculum are the focus of planning.	90%	59%
Good teachers gravitate to this school because of its reputation.	76%	58%

Educators at the higher performing high schools place great importance on relationships with students and fostering a positive learning atmosphere. The item with the highest rating across all of the qualities assessed in this survey was *"Strong relationships between students and teachers exist throughout this school,"* which was endorsed by 74% of educators. Another highly rated item was *"This school's environment is safe and orderly,"* endorsed by 68% of the educators as contributing "a great deal." These results suggest the importance of supportive, safe, and orderly learning environments.

Other aspects of school climate rated as top contributors to student achievement were related to expectations, including having *"an established climate of high expectations"* for students (71%) and for teachers (68%). Additionally, *"Teachers understand that the academic objectives of the established curriculum are the focus of planning"* (59%) was also seen as a top contributor.

The importance of *maximization of instructional time in core academic subjects* (71%) and *"Teachers are skilled at classroom management"* (61%) indicate the importance of school climates with focused instructional time.

Among the climate items rated as top contributors, nearly all had very high agreement ratings, suggesting that the educators believe the climate qualities are true about their school. The two top contributing climate items with the lowest agreement rates were *"The families we serve are committed to their children's education"* (73% agreement) and *"Good teachers gravitate to this school because of its reputation"* (76% agreement). Among the school climate markers rated as strong contributors, these two are perhaps least likely to be directly affected by school policy and practice.

School Practices Contributing Most to Student Achievement

Practices that support clear and high academic expectations were among those endorsed as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement. Other themes suggest the importance of high-quality curriculum and instructional resources, as well as use of assessments within instruction (Table 2).

Table 2: School Practices Most Commonly Rated as Strong Contributors to Student Achievement

Practice	% Agreement	% Responding Contributes "a Great Deal"
Classroom assessments are aligned with instruction.	96%	65%
School administrators make academics the number one priority at our school.	84%	60%
Teachers effectively use high-quality curriculum and teaching resources.	89%	59%
Teachers have access to high-quality curriculum and teaching resources.	89%	58%
Clear expectations about student learning standards and curriculum have been communicated to teachers.	93%	57%
The curriculum is driven by college readiness standards.	82%	55%
Teachers use formative assessment tools to impact instruction.	89%	53%

As mentioned previously, high expectations were considered an important aspect of climate contributing to student achievement. A top contributing practice related to this theme was *"Clear expectations about student learning standards and curriculum have been communicated to teachers"* (57%). Other important practices related to clarity of expectations include *"School administrators make academics the number one priority at our school"* (60%) and *"The curriculum is driven by college readiness standards"* (55%). The importance of these practices reinforces the importance of clear and high academic expectations.

Access to and use of quality curriculum and teaching resources was also deemed important; *"Teachers effectively use high-quality curriculum and teaching resources"* (59%) and *"Teachers have access to high-quality curriculum and teaching resources"* (58%) were both highly rated practices.

Use of assessments within instruction was also seen as an important contributor to student achievement. Educators indicated that *"Classroom assessments are aligned with instruction"* (65%) and *"Teachers use formative assessment tools to impact instruction"* (53%) contribute "a great deal" to student achievement.

School Qualities Contributing Least to Student Achievement

Of the 46 school qualities assessed, six were endorsed as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement by 25% or fewer of the respondents (marked in Figure 6 as green triangles). All six were related to teacher evaluation, collaboration, and professional development; all but one were school practices. These six qualities had relatively low agreement rates, suggesting that the surveyed educators are less likely to believe these qualities are true about their school. As noted earlier, the contribution ratings are strongly influenced by the agreement ratings. This study did not address the reasons for low agreement ratings. It is possible that some school qualities have low agreement ratings because educators see little or no benefit to committing to certain practices; alternatively, the low agreement ratings may be caused by lack of time or resources needed to implement practices or develop school qualities.

The practice least endorsed as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement was *"School administrators use student growth data when evaluating teachers,"* endorsed by just 17% of the respondents (Table 3). However, it is important to note that only 35% of the survey respondents agreed that this practice was used at their school.

Relatively few educators at higher performing high schools attribute their success to the inclusion of teachers in the planning and selection of professional development, or in the confidence teachers have in the value of the professional development they receive. Surprisingly, *routine collaboration between the high school teachers and their colleagues from feeder middle schools* was not rated as an important contributor to their success. Given prior research on the value of this practice,[12] the lack of this practice occurring (36% agreement) likely weakened its perceived effect.

Table 3: School Qualities Least Commonly Perceived as Strong Contributors to Student Achievement

Item	% Agreement	% Responding Contributes "a Great Deal"
School administrators use student growth data when evaluating teachers.	35%	17%
Teachers are included in planning and scheduling professional development.	52%	19%
Teachers are included in the selection of professional development content.	55%	22%
Teachers believe the professional development they receive is relevant and valuable.	58%	24%
High school teachers routinely collaborate with staff at our feeder middle school(s) to ensure common expectations for high school work.	36%	25%
Teachers are recognized for students' outstanding academic achievement.	63%	25%

Differences in Ratings by Staff Types

Overall, administrators were more likely than teachers to rate school qualities as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement. There were seven school qualities that showed significant differences in perceived importance across staff types (e.g., administrators, teachers of different subject areas, and special education and ELL teachers; Table 4).

Administrators and teachers disagreed about the value of administrator's coaching and evaluation practices. For example, 54% of the administrators rated their *"time in classrooms observing and coaching teachers"* as contributing "a great deal" to student achievement, as compared to less than 25% of all teachers. Other related qualities with significant differences between administrators and teachers include *"School administrators frequently observe teachers to monitor instructional practice and curriculum delivery"* (47% of administrators and 22% of teachers), *"School administrators provide feedback to teachers after classroom visits"* (49% of administrators and 25% of teachers), and *"School leaders effectively address inadequate staff performance"* (54% of administrators and 30% of teachers). In general, administrators were more likely than teachers to agree that evaluation practices were present at the school.

Table 4: School Qualities with Differences in Perceived Contribution across Staff Types

	% Agreement % Responding Contributes "a Great Deal"					
Item	Admin.	ELA	Math	Social Studies	Natural Science	Special Ed. & ELL
School administrators spend time in classrooms observing and coaching teachers.	93% 54%	67% 24%	65% 23%	62% 20%	50% 16%	67% 15%
School administrators frequently observe teachers to monitor instructional practice and curriculum delivery.	93% 47%	64% 32%	51% 25%	60% 18%	47% 20%	52% 10%
High school teachers routinely collaborate with staff at our feeder middle school(s) to ensure common expectations for high school work.	37% 23%	38% 20%	43% 42%	35% 5%	22% 28%	43% 35%
Clear expectations about student learning standards and curriculum have been communicated to teachers.	99% 67%	93% 68%	92% 64%	85% 31%	89% 50%	100% 50%
School administrators provide feedback to teachers after classroom visits.	95% 49%	76% 22%	86% 31%	85% 25%	72% 18%	81% 25%
School leaders effectively address inadequate staff performance.	88% 54%	46% 44%	39% 26%	43% 29%	28% 23%	57% 30%
Student achievement data are used regularly to support instructional decision-making.	91% 50%	81% 56%	72% 42%	73% 33%	72% 24%	76% 19%

Note. Statistical significance was determined based on Pearson's Chi-Square test with a significance level of 0.01. Special education and ELL staff responses are combined due to small sample sizes.

Not all of the differences were between administrators and teachers—some were between teachers of different subject areas. Math (42%) and special education or ELL teachers (35%) were more likely than ELA (20%) and social studies teachers (5%) to rate *routine collaboration with staff at our feeder middle schools* as contributing "a great deal." Social studies teachers (31%) were also less likely than others to endorse *"Clear expectations about student learning standards and curriculum have been communicated to teachers"* as a strong contributor. Special education and ELL teachers (19%) were least likely to place great importance on the *use of student achievement data to support instructional decision-making*.

Differences in Ratings by School Poverty Level

The schools studied included some with high poverty rates; it was thus possible to examine differences by school poverty level, as measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL). For these analyses, high poverty schools were defined as those with at least 50% FRL (16 of the 63 schools).

Climate Differences by School Poverty Level

Two aspects of climate were found to have significantly different perceived importance between educators in schools with 50% or more students eligible for FRL as compared to educators in schools with less than 50% FRL eligibility (Table 5). *"This school has an established climate of high expectations for students"* was perceived as a strong contributor by 79% of educators in lower poverty schools and 51% of educators in high poverty schools; *"The families we serve are committed to their children's education"* was seen as a strong contributor by 69% of educators in lower poverty schools and 37% of educators in high poverty schools. The agreement ratings of both of these qualities were also significantly lower for high poverty schools, indicating that the differences in importance may be attributable to the positive aspects of school climate being less apparent at the high poverty schools. The gap in agreement was particularly high for the item measuring family commitment (82% agreement in lower poverty schools vs. 47% agreement in high poverty schools).

Table 5: Aspects of School Climate with Rating Differences across School Poverty Level

Item	% Agreement % Responding Contributes "a Great Deal" Lower Poverty	 High Poverty
This school has an established climate of high expectations for students.	93%* 79%*	81%* 51%*
The families we serve are committed to their children's education.	82%* 69%*	47%* 37%*
This school's environment is safe and orderly.	96%* 70%	87%* 63%
Good teachers gravitate to this school because of its reputation.	84%* 60%	56%* 51%

Note. Statistical significance was determined based on a Pearson's Chi-Square test with p-value less than 0.01, and significant relationships are indicated with an asterisk (*).

Educators at lower poverty schools were also significantly more likely than those at high poverty schools to agree that *"This school's environment is safe and orderly"* (96% of lower poverty schools and 87% of high poverty schools) and that *"Good teachers gravitate to this school because of its reputation"* (84% of lower poverty schools and 56% of high poverty schools). However, the contribution ratings for these items were not significantly different between educators in lower and high poverty schools.

Differences in Practices by School Poverty Level

One practice was found to have significantly different perceived importance between educators in lower and high poverty schools (Table 6): *"Class time is spent preparing for state summative assessments"* was seen as a strong contributor by 28% at lower poverty schools and 50% at high poverty schools. There was not a significant difference in the percentage of educators who agreed that this practice occurred at their school (67% at lower poverty schools and 77% at high poverty schools).

Table 6: School Practices with Rating Differences across School Poverty Level

	% Agreement % Responding Contributes "a Great Deal"	
Item	Lower Poverty	High Poverty
Class time is spent preparing for state summative assessments.	67% 28%*	77% 50%*
Students are recognized for outstanding academic achievement and/or growth.	95%* 48%	81%* 47%
Teachers effectively use high-quality curriculum and teaching resources.	93%* 77%	77%* 54%
School administrators use student growth data when evaluating teachers.	30%* 15%	51%* 21%

Note. Statistical significance was determined based on a Pearson's Chi-Square test with p-value less than 0.01, and significant relationships are indicated with an asterisk (*).

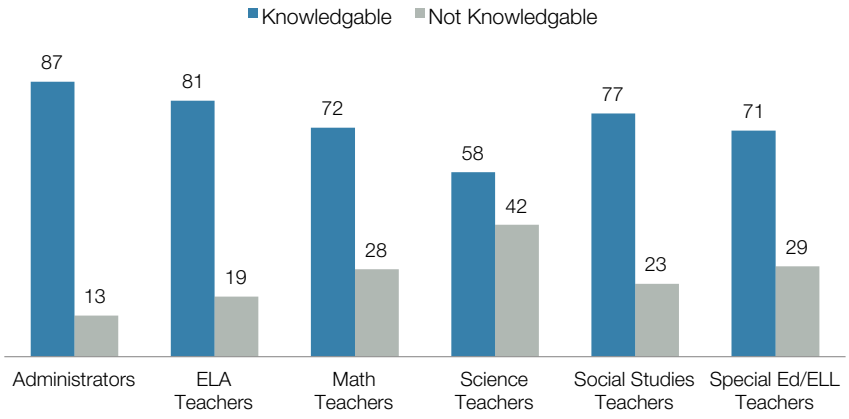
Three practices had significantly different levels of agreement between lower and high poverty schools, but nonsignificant differences in importance. The practices *"Students are recognized for outstanding academic achievement and/or growth"* (95% of lower poverty schools and 81% of high poverty schools) and *"Teachers effectively use high-quality curriculum and teaching resources"* (93% of lower poverty schools and 77% of high poverty schools) were more likely to be perceived as occurring by educators in lower poverty schools than in high poverty schools. Conversely, *"School administrators use student growth data when evaluating teachers"* was more likely to be perceived as occurring by educators in high poverty schools (51%) than in lower poverty schools (30%).

Perceptions of the Common Core State Standards

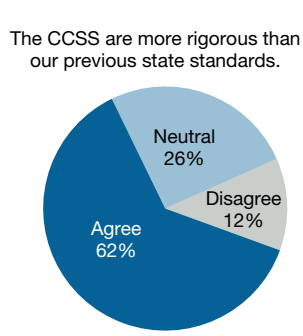
The study assessed educators' opinions of the rigor, clarity, and usefulness of the CCSS. Respondents were first asked how familiar they were with the CCSS. Administrators were the most likely to indicate having knowledge of the Standards (87%), followed by ELA teachers (81%) and social studies teachers (77%). Natural science teachers were the least likely to report having knowledge of the Standards (58%). A draft of the common science standards is due to be released; however, only the math and ELA standards were available at the time of this survey.

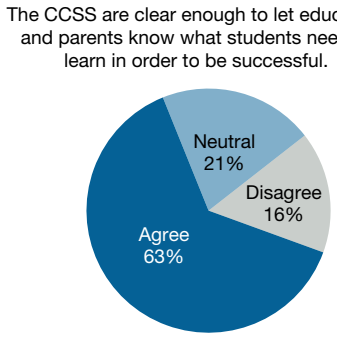
Overall, teachers (27%) were more likely than administrators (13%) to report knowing very little or nothing about the Standards. The following results are based on the educators who indicated having at least a moderate amount of knowledge about the Standards.

Figure 7: Percentage of Participants Reporting Knowledge of Common Core State Standards



Relatively few educators at higher performing high schools disagreed that the Standards offer improved rigor and sufficient clarity.



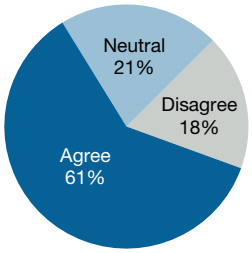


Overall, 62% agreed that the Standards are *more rigorous than their previous state standards* and 63% agreed that the Standards are clear enough to let educators and parents know what students need to learn in order to be successful. Roughly one-quarter of respondents were neutral on these two topics. Administrators (80%) were more likely than ELA (44%) and math (55%) teachers to agree that the Standards are more rigorous than previous state standards.

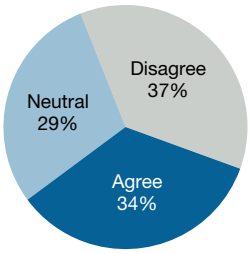
Response options for an item measuring familiarity with the Standards included: (1) I know a lot about them (24%); (2) I know a moderate amount about them (52%); (3) I have heard of them, but know very little about them (23%); and (4) I have not heard of them (<1%). Analyses of the CCSS questions were conducted using responses from those who reported knowing at least a moderate amount about the Standards.

Educators at higher performing high schools reported receiving more guidance from the district than from the state for implementing the Standards. A majority (61%) reported adequate guidance from the district, whereas only one-third reported adequate guidance from the state.

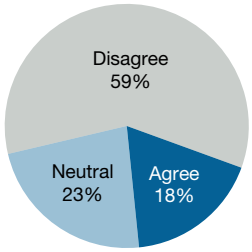
My school receives adequate district-level guidance for implementing the CCSS.



My school receives adequate state-level guidance for implementing the CCSS.



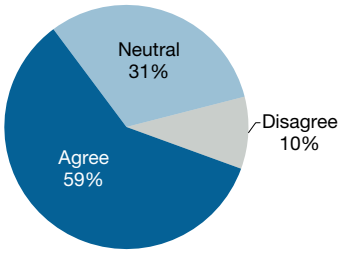
Adequate funding is available to our district to implement all aspects of the CCSS.



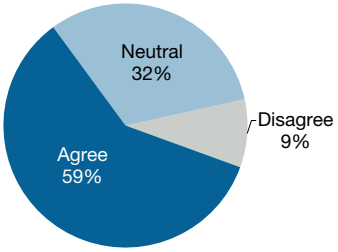
Few educators at higher performing high schools (18%) believe that adequate funding is available to their district to implement all aspects of the Standards.

Very few educators at higher performing high schools disagreed that the Standards will improve student skills in ELA (10%) or mathematics (9%). However, roughly one-third of respondents were neutral on these topics. Overall, the majority of educators were optimistic (61%) or neutral (27%) that the Standards will improve student readiness for college and careers.

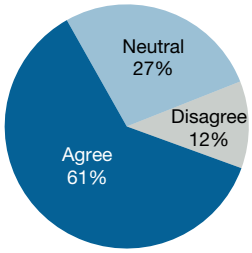
The CCSS will lead to improved student skills in English/language arts.



The CCSS will lead to improved student skills in mathematics.



Overall, the CCSS will improve student readiness for college and careers.



Overall, the results of this study support the findings of other recent research on perceptions of the CCSS (Center on Education Policy [CEP] 2011; 2012).

Common Core State Standards Implementation Progress

The survey also addressed plans for when schools would *begin* addressing various CCSS implementation tasks.

More than half of the educators indicated that they have begun or will soon begin addressing four of the seven implementation tasks listed in the survey. More specifically, schools will have begun the following tasks before the end of the 2011–2012 school year:

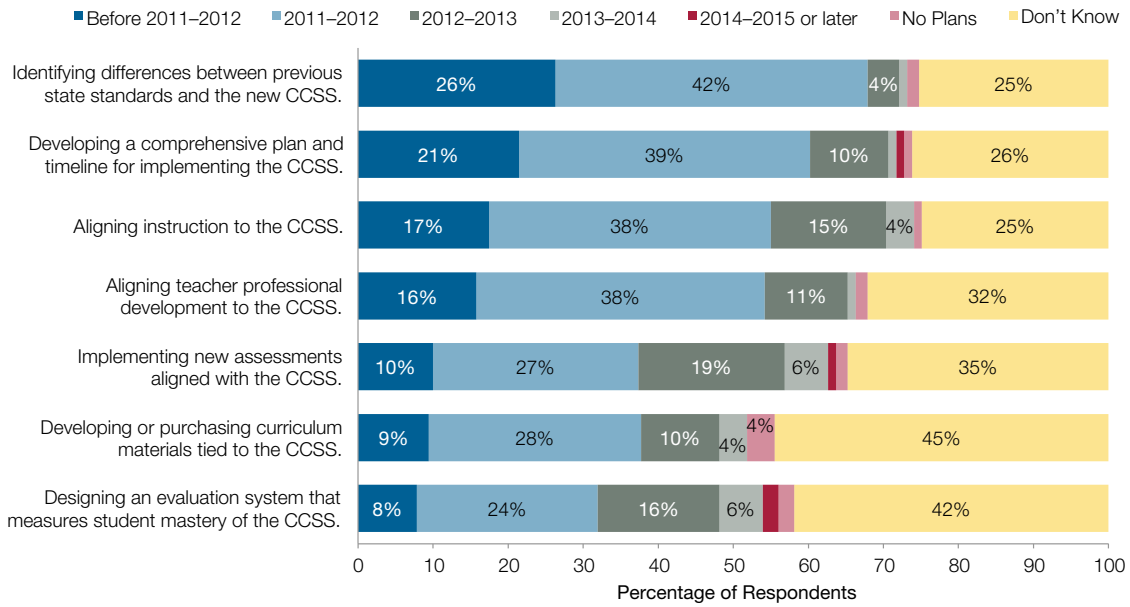
- Identifying differences between previous state standards and the new Common Core State Standards (68%)
- Developing a comprehensive plan and timeline for implementing the Standards by the current school year (60%)
- Aligning instruction to the Standards (55%)
- Aligning teacher professional development to the Standards (54%)

In addition, more than half of the educators indicated plans to begin implementing new assessments aligned with the CCSS before the end of the 2012–2013 school year (57%).

Although nearly half of the schools plan to begin designing evaluation systems that measure student mastery of the Standards (48%) and developing or purchasing curriculum materials tied to the Standards (48%) before 2013–2014, almost the same number were uncertain of their school's plans to begin these same tasks (42% and 45%, respectively).

These results are consistent with other recent findings on CCSS implementation progress by 2011–2012 (CEP 2011; 2012).

Figure 8: CCSS Implementation Progress



An open-ended question asked about the challenges of implementing the Common Core State Standards. The biggest challenge mentioned by both teachers (33%) and administrators (34%) was lack of funding, followed by lack of time or resources (31% of teachers and 30% of administrators) and lack of teacher knowledge of the Standards (23% of teachers and 32% of administrators).

Differences in Perceptions of the Common Core State Standards by School Poverty Classification

Two of the items assessing perceptions of the Common Core State Standards had significantly different agreement rates when comparing high poverty schools to lower poverty schools (Table 7). Educators in high poverty schools were more likely than educators in lower poverty schools to indicate that *"The Common Core State Standards will lead to improved student skills in English/language arts"* (52% for lower poverty schools and 76% for high poverty schools) and that *"My school receives adequate state-level guidance for implementing the Common Core State Standards"* (27% for lower poverty schools and 52% for high poverty schools). There were no significant differences by poverty level in the timelines for the CCSS implementation tasks.

Table 7: Differences in CCSS Perceptions by School Poverty Level

	% Agreement	
Item	Lower Poverty	High Poverty
The Common Core State Standards will lead to improved student skills in English/language arts.	52%	76%
My school receives adequate state-level guidance for implementing the Common Core State Standards.	27%	52%

Note. Statistical significance was determined based on a Pearson's Chi-Square test with p-value less than 0.01, and the relationships are significant for both of the items in this table.

Discussion

ACT's EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT assessments form a longitudinal system for measuring students' growth toward college readiness between grades 8 and 12, providing a powerful way to identify higher performing high schools—a critical step for studying high school effectiveness.

We identified examples of high schools where students have progressed toward CCR at atypically fast rates and surveyed educators to determine what they believe has contributed most to their success. The study also assessed perceptions of the Common Core State Standards and progress made in implementing the Standards.

Study Limitations

To make appropriate use of the study's results and to inform the design of future studies, it is important to understand the study's limitations, including:

- The study did not compare the qualities of higher performing high schools to those of average or lower performing high schools. It is possible that the school qualities deemed most important by the educators from the higher performing high schools are not different than those deemed most important by those at other schools.
- The study assessed 31 specific practices and 15 aspects of climate. There are other practices and climate qualities that were not assessed that are also important. Moreover, the study did not assess district practices that affect school and classroom practices and climate.
- The study relied on educators' reports on the presence of practices and climate without independent observation to assess the reliability of such reports. The study also relied on educators' ability to correctly attribute student achievement to each practice and aspect of climate.
- Relative to the national population of secondary teachers, few educators from racial/ethnic minority groups participated in the study.
- The overall sample size of 272 was sufficient to distinguish the perceived importance of many school qualities, but did not ensure statistical power for detecting all possible subgroup differences.

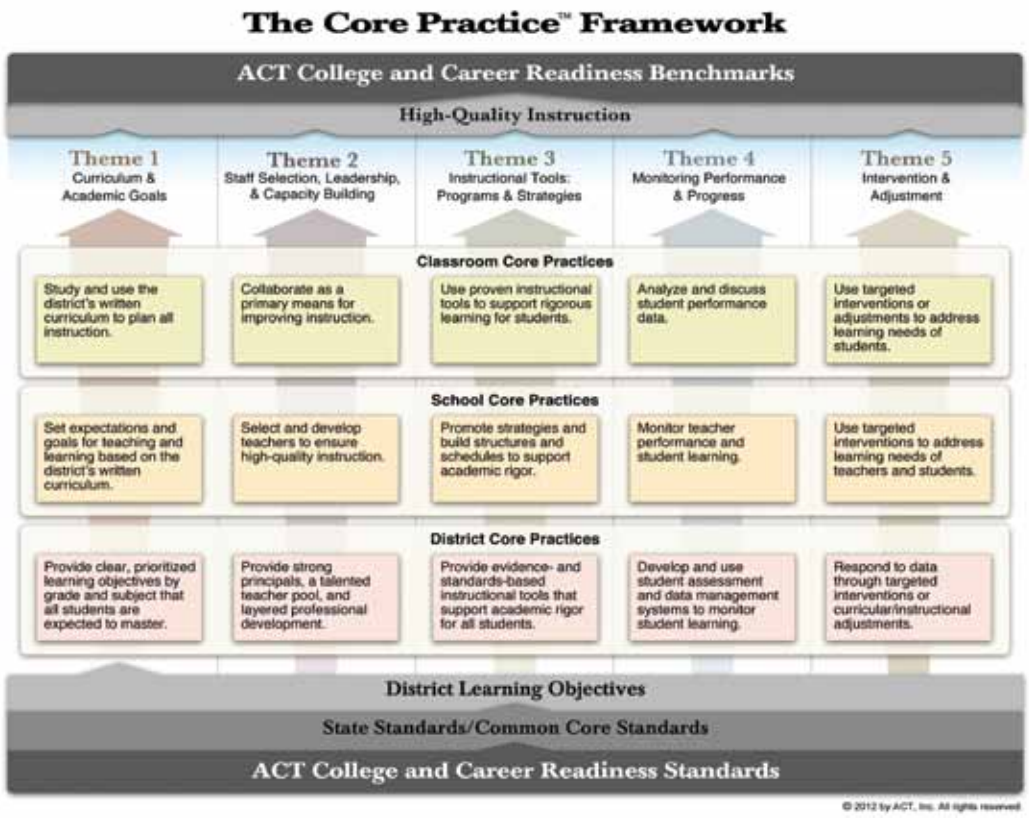
Relating Findings to Core Practices

With today's focus on CCR as the goal for all students, it is prudent to study the school qualities deemed most important by educators from high schools where strong growth toward CCR is occurring. School leaders and policymakers should not view the study findings as suggesting practices or reforms that should be quickly adopted to ensure stronger growth toward CCR. Instead, we must understand how the qualities deemed most important in this study fit within the big picture of practices at the classroom, school, and district levels. With this understanding, school leaders and policymakers can apply the results of this study more coherently to support sustained school improvement.

The National Center for Educational Achievement's (NCEA) *Core Practice Framework* is a research-based guide to school improvement, advocating a system-wide, cohesive approach to improving teaching and learning, based on school qualities that distinguish high performing schools from average schools (ACT 2012). The Framework is built around five themes (curriculum and academic goals; staff selection, leadership, and

capacity building; instructional tools: programs and strategies; monitoring performance and progress; and intervention and adjustment) involving stakeholders at three levels: district, school, and classroom. Core practices are associated with each of the themes, at each level of the school system (Figure 9). Associated with each of the 15 core practices are critical actions that describe the key behaviors that collectively forge each practice.

Figure 9: The Core Practice Framework



The Core Practice Framework: Reading from bottom to top, the path to readiness begins with state standards and district learning objectives as the foundation. Applying the 15 Core Practices to the development and teaching of this curriculum leads to high-quality instruction, which, in turn, creates the opportunity for college and career readiness for all students.

Having strong relationships between students and teachers was rated by participants in this study as the strongest contributor to student achievement; having a safe and orderly school environment was also among the strongest contributors. Like other aspects of school climate, these are supported by systems for improving teaching and learning that coordinate efforts across the three levels of the Framework (district, school, and classroom). For example, "building support structures to enable increasing numbers of students to engage successfully in rigorous coursework" is a critical action supporting the core school practice for Theme 3 of the Framework. If practiced coherently with appropriate coordination among district, school, and classroom stakeholders, this action would promote supportive and orderly school environments.

Having clear and high expectations of both students and teachers was rated a top contributor at the higher performing high schools. Critical actions at all three levels of Theme 1 of the Framework suggest steps that can be taken to work toward a climate with clear and high expectations.[13] While the Core Practice Framework does not explicitly address all aspects of school climate, careful development of the Framework practices can improve school climate. For example, by selecting and developing a high quality team of educators (Theme 2), it is easier to set the tone and establish a culture of high achievement expectations.

Aspects of school climate reflecting strong classroom management and maximization of instructional time in core academic subjects were consistently rated as strong contributors. Again, both of these climate qualities are supported by the Framework. The school practice for Theme 5 of the Framework ("Use targeted interventions to address learning needs of teachers and students") is supported by quickly intervening when teachers are experiencing difficulty in their classrooms. The classroom practice for Theme 3 of the Framework ("Use proven instructional tools to support rigorous learning for students") is supported by using allocated time as a tool to maximize learning opportunities.

Critical actions of Theme 3 also suggest ways to increase the use of high-quality instructional tools and strategies, which emerged as another top contributor. At the school level, defining high-yield instructional strategies and reinforcing their use in all classrooms is a critical action supporting Theme 3 at the school level; at the classroom level, using high-yield instructional strategies as tools to support rigorous learning also reinforces the core practice. As with all practices, it is not merely knowing about high-yield instructional strategies that is important; rather, carefully implementing the details of the practice across all three levels matters most.

The use of assessments within instruction was also rated a top contributor at the higher performing high schools. Theme 4 of the Core Practice Framework focuses on monitoring student performance and progress, and includes "providing diagnostic and formative assessments that are aligned with the district's written curriculum" as a critical action at the district level. At the school level, "supporting the development and use of more frequent common assessments than those provided by the district" is another critical action supporting the core practice.

One of the fundamental bases of the Framework is cohesion, such as having alignment of curriculum between grade levels such that students complete each grade level well prepared for the next. We found that collaboration intended to ensure common expectations is not frequently occurring between middle school teachers and the high school educators

surveyed in this study; only 36% of educators agreed that *"High school teachers routinely collaborate with staff at our feeder middle school(s) to ensure common expectations for high school work."* Perhaps owing to time constraints and competing priorities, educators at higher performing high schools are not able to commit to this practice.

Other practices that form the Framework but that higher performing high schools are having difficulty implementing include ample time for teacher collaboration (48% of teachers and 72% of administrators agreed that *"collaboration time is built into teachers' schedules"*) and providing high-quality professional development (53% of teachers and 71% of administrators agreed that *"Teachers believe the professional development they receive is relevant and valuable"*). While the underlying causes are unclear, discrepancies in teacher and administrator perceptions should be monitored and addressed to ensure that teachers receive the support and tools they need to be successful.

Conclusion

ACT recognizes that CCR for all students is a critically important yet challenging goal—one that changes expectations by setting higher standards for the level of readiness that all students need as they leave high school. Some schools are advancing students toward CCR at atypically fast rates, and it is worthwhile to understand what the educators at these schools believe is contributing to their success. The results of this study suggest that educators at higher performing high schools attribute much of their success to having supportive and orderly learning environments, as well as having a clear focus on academics.

Neither short-term fixes nor isolated reforms are likely to improve high school performance and raise students' CCR. Instead, persistent and sustained improvement efforts must be coordinated across district, school, and classroom levels. Such efforts will promote the positive aspects of school climate deemed most important by the higher performing schools, make the contributing school practices more effective, and lead to improvements in college and career readiness.

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Endnotes

1 Common Core State Standards Initiative (www.corestandards.org).

2 Specifically, schools were identified based on one or more of the following criteria:

Growth—39 of the participating schools were identified based on average growth in student achievement from ACT's EXPLORE (8th grade) to the ACT (11th–12th grade). A school was selected if its average growth was in the top 10% of all similar schools nationwide testing at least 50% of their graduating students with EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT, indicating that the average ACT Composite score for this school (for students who took both EXPLORE and the ACT) was at least one point above normal growth expectations.

Improvement—22 of the participating schools were identified based on steady improvements in the average ACT Composite score of their graduating students between 2006 and 2010, among schools testing at least 50% of their graduating students.

Achievement—2 of the participating schools were identified based on overall achievement level as measured by the average ACT Composite score of their graduating students. Schools were identified based on their average ACT Composite score in 2010, among schools testing at least 50% of their graduating students.

3 High school principals were contacted to invite school participation in the study. Early in the recruitment process, 11 of the high schools chose not to participate, and so the initial set of 100 higher performing schools was expanded to 111 with 11 replacement schools. Overall, 63 of 111 high schools elected to participate, for a school response rate of 57%. The most common reason principals declined to participate was to protect teacher time. Participating high schools include those in the following table:

High School Name	City, State
Altoona High School	Altoona, WI
Baton Rouge Magnet High School	Baton Rouge, LA
Beachwood High School	Beachwood, OH
Beechwood High School	Ft Mitchell, KY
Boyne City High School	Boyne City, MI
Brentwood High School	Brentwood, TN
Brookings High School	Brookings, SD
Brookland High School	Brookland, AR
Bruce High School	Bruce, MS
Caddo Hills High School	Norman, AR
Calhoun County High School	St Matthews, SC
Castor High School	Castor, LA
Central High	Springfield, MO
Central High School	Clifton, IL
Chiefland High School	Chiefland, FL
Clayton High School	Clayton, MO
Danville High School	Danville, KY
De Queen High School	De Queen, AR
Dolores Senior High School	Dolores, CO
Dublin Coffman High School	Dublin, OH
Dublin Scioto High School	Dublin, OH
East Grand Rapids High School	Grand Rapids, MI
Edina High School	Edina, MN
Evergreen Park Community HS	Evergreen Park, IL
Farwell High School	Farwell, MI
Galena High School	Galena, KS
George Washington High School	Denver, CO
Geronimo High School	Geronimo, OK
Grandview High School	Aurora, CO
Hampton Dumont High School	Hampton, IA
Hancock High School	Kiln, MS
Harrisburg High School	Harrisburg, SD
Hillcrest High School	Tuscaloosa, AL
Jack Britt High School	Fayetteville, NC
Jackson Hole High School	Jackson, WY
Jenks High School	Jenks, OK
Jones College Prep	Chicago, IL
Jonesboro High School	Jonesboro, AR
La Junta High School	La Junta, CO
Ladue Horton Watkins HS	Saint Louis, MO
Lafayette High School	Wildwood, MO
Loreauville High School	Loreauville, LA
Magdalena High School	Magdalena, NM
Marquette High School	Chesterfield, MO
Minnetonka High School	Minnetonka, MN
Mountain Brook High School	Birmingham, AL
Nettleton High School	Jonesboro, AR
Norman North High School	Norman, OK
Northeast High School	Pride, LA
Ottawa Hills High School	Toledo, OH
Paden City High School	Paden City, WV
Powell High School	Powell, WY
Riverton High School	Riverton, KS
Salina Central High School	Salina, KS
Sartell High School	Sartell, MN
Simley Senior High School	Inver Grove Hgts, MN
Stanley-Boyd High School	Stanley, WI
Stillwater Area Senior HS	Stillwater, MN
Stillwater HS	Stillwater, OK
Teton High School	Driggs, ID
Timpview High School	Provo, UT
White Station High School	Memphis, TN
Wood River High School	Hailey, ID

4 The averages are based on students from the study schools who completed high school between 2006 and 2010 and had taken EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT. The national averages are based on all students who took EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT and completed high school in 2010.

5 The table below contains the College Readiness Benchmarks for EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT.

College Readiness Benchmarks

Subject	EXPLORE (Grade 8)	PLAN	ACT
English	13	15	18
Mathematics	17	19	22
Reading	15	17	21
Science	20	21	24

6 The table below indicates that students from the participating schools are more likely to be ready for credit-bearing college courses than others in the nation.

Percentages of Students Meeting College Readiness Benchmarks

	English	Math	Reading	Science	All 4 Benchmarks
Participants	82	61	68	47	41
National 2010 ACT-tested graduating class	66	43	52	29	24

7 Based on data from the 2009 NCES Common Core of Data (http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/).

8 A number of sources were consulted during the survey development phase, including the National Center for Educational Achievement's Core Practice Framework (NCEA 2009), the International Center for Leadership in Education's research on successful schools (Daggett 2005), the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's research on what works in schools (Marzano 2003), and the Center on Education Policy's research on the Common Core State Standards (CEP 2011).

9 The survey items assessing school qualities and summaries of the response frequencies are given below.

Survey Item Prompt	Item Type	% Agreement	% Responding Contributes "a Great Deal"
Clear expectations about student learning standards and curriculum have been communicated to teachers.	Practice	93%	57%
This school has an established climate of high expectations for teachers.	Climate	92%	68%
This school has an established climate of high expectations for students.	Climate	89%	71%
Strong relationships between students and teachers exist throughout this school.	Climate	94%	74%
The families we serve are committed to their children's education.	Climate	73%	60%
Good teachers gravitate to this school because of its reputation.	Climate	76%	58%
This school's environment is safe and orderly.	Climate	94%	68%
Effective and continuous professional development is provided for teachers.	Practice	74%	35%
Teachers believe the professional development they receive is relevant and valuable.	Climate	58%	24%
Teachers understand the connection between training and its benefits for improving student learning.	Climate	83%	32%
Teachers are included in the selection of professional development content.	Practice	55%	22%
Teachers are included in planning and scheduling professional development.	Practice	52%	19%
Collaboration time is built into teachers' schedules.	Practice	55%	41%
Teachers use collaboration time effectively.	Climate	75%	43%
Teachers routinely collaborate on curriculum and instruction across grades.	Practice	58%	39%
Teachers routinely collaborate on curriculum and instruction within grades and across subjects.	Practice	59%	32%
High school teachers routinely collaborate with staff at our feeder middle school(s) to ensure common expectations for high school work.	Practice	36%	25%
School administrators make academics the number one priority at our school.	Practice	84%	60%
School administrators spend time in classrooms observing and coaching teachers.	Practice	71%	30%
School administrators provide feedback to teachers after classroom visits.	Practice	84%	31%
School administrators and teachers implement evidence-based instructional practices.	Practice	88%	48%
School administrators and teachers share a common understanding of curriculum and standards.	Climate	84%	45%

Survey Item Prompt	Item Type	% Agreement	% Responding Contributes "a Great Deal"
Teachers have access to high-quality curriculum and teaching resources.	Practice	89%	58%
Teachers effectively use high-quality curriculum and teaching resources.	Practice	89%	59%
Teachers understand that the academic objectives of the established curriculum are the focus of planning.	Climate	90%	59%
Instructional time is maximized in core academic subjects.	Climate	88%	71%
Teachers are encouraged to experiment with teaching methods.	Practice	83%	35%
Teachers use instructional methods targeted to students that are below grade level.	Practice	80%	44%
Class time is spent preparing for state summative assessments.	Practice	70%	34%
Teachers use formative assessment tools to impact instruction.	Practice	89%	53%
Teachers are skilled at classroom management.	Climate	93%	61%
The curriculum is driven by college readiness standards.	Practice	82%	55%
A longitudinal database system is in place to track student progress.	Practice	67%	28%
Student achievement data are used regularly to support instructional decision-making.	Practice	79%	40%
Assessment results are regularly used for diagnosis and intervention with students.	Practice	84%	49%
School administrators use student growth data when evaluating teachers.	Practice	35%	17%
School administrators frequently observe teachers to monitor instructional practice and curriculum delivery.	Practice	65%	29%
Classroom assessments are aligned with instruction.	Practice	96%	65%
Teachers are recognized for students' outstanding academic achievement.	Practice	63%	25%
Students are recognized for outstanding academic achievement and/or growth.	Practice	91%	48%
Intervention programs and new initiatives that don't work are dropped.	Practice	63%	29%
We are able to respond to each student's unique needs.	Climate	71%	47%
We have strategies in place for improving students' motivation and engagement.	Practice	73%	41%
Structured and intense instructional support is provided to teachers to ensure students meet goals.	Practice	56%	32%
School leaders effectively address inadequate staff performance.	Climate	54%	37%
School leaders and teachers establish reasonable timelines and benchmarks for improvement.	Practice	71%	32%

CCSS Perceptions Survey Item Prompt	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neutral
The Common Core State Standards will make my job easier.	39%	43%	18%
The Common Core State Standards are clear enough to let educators and parents know what students need to learn in order to be successful.	63%	21%	16%
The Common Core State Standards are more rigorous than our previous state standards.	62%	26%	12%
Adequate funding is available to our district to implement all aspects of the Common Core State Standards.	18%	23%	59%
My school receives adequate state-level guidance for implementing the Common Core State Standards.	34%	29%	37%
My school receives adequate district-level guidance for implementing the Common Core State Standards.	61%	21%	18%
Overall, the Common Core State Standards will improve student readiness for college and careers.	61%	27%	12%
The Common Core State Standards will lead to improved student skills in mathematics.	59%	32%	9%
The Common Core State Standards will lead to improved student skills in English/language arts.	59%	31%	10%

CCSS Implementation Survey Item Prompt	Before 2011–2012	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014	2014–2015 or later	No Plans	Don't Know
Identifying differences between previous state standards and the new Common Core State Standards.	26%	42%	4%	1%	0%	2%	25%
Developing a comprehensive plan and timeline for implementing the Common Core State Standards.	21%	39%	10%	1%	1%	1%	26%
Aligning instruction to the Common Core State Standards.	17%	38%	15%	4%	0%	1%	25%
Aligning teacher professional development to the Common Core State Standards.	16%	38%	11%	1%	0%	2%	32%
Implementing new assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards.	10%	27%	19%	6%	1%	2%	35%
Developing or purchasing curriculum materials tied to the Common Core State Standards.	9%	28%	10%	4%	0%	4%	45%
Designing an evaluation system that measures student mastery of the Common Core State Standards.	8%	24%	16%	6%	2%	2%	42%

10 The following table displays years of experience for participating administrators and teachers.

Numbers of Administrators and Teachers by Number of Years as Administrator/Teacher

Years	Administrators	Teachers
Less than 5	16	22
5–9	29	39
10–19	24	66
20–29	4	41
Over 30	0	24
No Response	0	7

11 A majority of the surveyed teachers (96%) and administrators (86%) were White, compared to 84% of secondary teachers nationally (NCES 2005). Nationally, minority teachers represent a small portion of the teaching force and a gap persists between the percentage of minority students and the percentage of minority teachers (Ingersoll and May 2011).

12 Parrish, T., L. Poland, M. Arellanes, J. Ernandes, and J. Viloria. (2011). *Making the Move: Transition Strategies at California Schools with High Graduation Rates*. San Mateo, CA: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved 5/24/2012 (http://www.cacompcenter.org/pdf/CA_CC_Transitions_Report_Final.pdf).

13 For example, critical actions include "Establish a written district curriculum with learning objectives specifying the knowledge and skills students must acquire by grade and subject" (district level) and "Set a limited number of ambitious school improvement goals stated in terms of student academic achievement" (school level).

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